

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-18-349T](#), a testimony before the Committee on Veterans' Affairs, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

VA's disability compensation program pays cash benefits to veterans with disabilities connected to their military service. In recent years, the number of appeals of VA's benefit decisions has been rising. For decisions made on appeal in fiscal year 2017, veterans waited an average of 3 years for resolution by either VBA or the Board, and 7 years for resolution by the Board. The Veterans Appeals Improvement and Modernization Act of 2017 makes changes to VA's current (legacy) appeals process, giving veterans new options to have their claims further reviewed by VBA or appeal directly to the Board. The Act requires VA to submit to Congress and GAO a plan for implementing a new appeals process, and includes a provision for GAO to assess VA's plan.

This testimony focuses on the extent to which VA's plan: (1) addresses the required elements in the Act, and (2) reflects sound planning practices identified in prior GAO work. GAO's work entailed reviewing and assessing VA's appeals plan and related documents against sound planning practices, and soliciting VA's views on GAO's assessments.

What GAO Recommends

In its forthcoming report, GAO is considering recommending that VA: fully address all legally required elements in its appeals plan, articulate how it will monitor and assess the new appeals process as compared to the legacy process, augment its master schedule for implementation, and more fully address risk.

View [GAO-18-349T](#). For more information, contact Elizabeth Curda at (202) 512-7215 or curdae@gao.gov.

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VA DISABILITY BENEFITS

Opportunities Exist to Better Ensure Successful Appeals Reform

What GAO Found

The Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) plan for implementing a new disability appeals process while attending to appeals in the current process addresses most, but not all, elements required by the Veterans Appeals Improvement and Modernization Act of 2017 (Act). VA's appeals plan addresses 17 of 22 required elements, partially addresses 4, and does not address 1. For example, not addressed is the required element to include the resources needed by the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) and the Board of Veterans' Appeals (Board) to implement the new appeals process and address legacy appeals under the current process. VA needs this information to certify, as specified under the Act, that it has sufficient resources to implement appeals reform and make timely appeals decisions under the new and legacy processes.

VA's appeals plan reflects certain sound planning practices, but it could benefit from including important details in several key planning areas:

Performance measurement: VA's plan reflects steps taken to track performance, but could articulate a more complete and balanced set of goals and measures for monitoring and assessing performance on a range of dimensions of success. Specifically, the plan reports that VA is developing a process to track timeliness of the new and legacy processes. However, contrary to sound planning practices, the plan does not include timeliness goals for all five appeals options available to veterans, does not include goals or measures for additional aspects of performance (such as accuracy or cost), and does not explain how VA will monitor or assess the new process compared to the legacy process. Unless VA clearly articulates a complete and balanced set of goals and measures, it could inadvertently incentivize staff to focus on certain aspects of appeals performance over others or fail to improve overall service to veterans.

Project management: VA's plan includes a master schedule for implementing the new appeals plan; however, this schedule falls short of sound practices because it does not include key planned activities—such as its pilot test of two of the five appeals options. In addition, the schedule does not reflect other sound practices for guiding implementation and establishing accountability—such as articulating interim goals and needed resources for, and interdependencies among, activities. Unless VA augments its master schedule to include all key activities and reflect sound practices, VA may be unable to provide reasonable assurance that it has the essential program management information needed for this complex and important effort.

Risk assessment: VA has taken steps to assess and mitigate some risks related to appeals reform by, for example, pilot testing two of the five appeals options through its Rapid Appeals Modernization Program (RAMP). However, as designed, RAMP does not include key features of a well-developed and documented pilot test. For example, VA has not articulated how it will assess RAMP before proceeding with full implementation. In addition, RAMP is not pilot testing three options and, as a result, VA will not have data on the extent to which veterans will appeal directly to the Board when given the option. Unless VA identifies and mitigates key risks associated with implementing a new process, VA is taking a chance that untested aspects will not perform as desired.